

# *Cringe histories: Harold Pinter and the Steptoes*

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## Article

# Cringe Histories: Harold Pinter and the Steptoes

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**Abstract:** This article argues that cringe humour in British television had begun at least by the early 1960s and derived from a theatre history in which conventions of Naturalism were modified by emergent British writers working with European avant-garde motifs. The article makes the case by analysing the importance of cringe to the BBC sitcom *Steptoe and Son*, tracing its form and themes back to the ‘comedy of menace’ and ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ emblematised by the early work of playwright Harold Pinter. The article links the play that made Pinter’s reputation, *The Birthday Party*, to dramatic tropes and social commentary identified in *Steptoe and Son* and in other British sitcoms with cringe elements. The analysis not only discusses relationships between the different dramatic works on stage and screen but also pursues some of the other connections between sitcom and Pinter’s drama via networks of actors and contemporaneous discourses of critical commentary. It assesses the political stakes of cringe as a comic form, particularly the failure of cringe to impel political activism, and places this in the context of the repeated broadcast of Pinter’s plays and episodes of *Steptoe and Son* over an extended period.

**Keywords:** television; comedy; sitcom; cringe; theatre; Britain; Harold Pinter; *Steptoe and Son*; history



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## 1. Introduction

Cringe comedies make up a significant body of work in British television situation comedy, with examples including *I’m Alan Partridge* (Baynham et al. 2002–2003), *The Office* (Gervais and Merchant 2005), and *Nighty Night* (Davies 2012). In addition to transfers of British cringe sitcom formats to other territories, such as the US series *The Office* (Daniels et al. 2019) or *Veep* (Iannucci et al. 2020), and original programmes devised outside the UK such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David 2020), the form is evident in other media such as cinema and stand-up comedy performance. Cringe can be defined in a range of ways and has a spectrum of related instantiations, including comedy of embarrassment, gross-out comedy, and awkward comedy (Schwanebeck 2015, pp. 107–11). However, as the examples cited here show, it is a phenomenon most identified with programmes (or films and other works) produced in the twenty-first century. The importance of this article is its historicization of cringe television sitcom, looking at how it emerged in a British context that shaped its main formal properties, social concerns, and modes of address to its audiences. This article shows how a strand of dark, troubling but also comic drama on the theatre stage, spearheaded by the playwright Harold Pinter, laid the foundations for cringe. The article links Pinter’s high-profile stage works to the emergent British sitcom forms represented by the work of the screenwriters Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, especially the BBC sitcom *Steptoe and Son* (Galton and Simpson 2011). It concludes that some of the critical debates around cringe, especially its political role, can be better understood by tracing its histories.

## 2. Results

Cringe humour in British television had begun at least by the early 1960s and derived from a theatre history. It adopted and blended several components. One was the Naturalism dominant in 1950s British theatre, underpinning the mainstream dramas of London’s West End, touring repertory theatre, and also the new realist dramas that followed *Look Back*

in *Anger* (Osborne 1957). Detailed stage settings and exploration of character psychology typify this form. Another ingredient was supplied by the arrival of challenging European theatre, characterised by existential bleakness and despairing humour, labelled by British commentators the Theatre of the Absurd. Harold Pinter brought these strands together and became the most publicly recognized proponent of the resulting dramatic form, and the article traces cringe back to the play that made Pinter's reputation, *The Birthday Party* (Pinter 1963a). Its dramatic tropes and social commentary can be identified in *Steptoe and Son* and in other British sitcoms with cringe elements, but with the emphasis on comic effects. Doing cringe within sitcom means it benefits from the repetition and extended series forms in which sitcom is produced. However, sitcom's formal constraints also add weight to the arguments made about cringe as a whole that it is politically limited by its bleak hopelessness despite its power as social critique.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1. Comedy, Menace, and Cringe

Harold Pinter had only recently begun writing plays in the mid-1950s, alongside a moderately successful career as a professional actor. While he was performing in a touring theatre production of the comedy *Doctor in the House* (Willis 1957) he wrote his first full-length drama (Billington 2007, p. 74), *The Birthday Party*, commissioned by the young producer Michael Codron (Ellis 2003). The play is set in a small English seaside resort, in the living room of a boarding-house. The middle-aged owners, Meg and her husband Petey, a seaside deckchair attendant, have rooms to let, and have one long-term resident, Stanley, an unemployed concert-party pianist. Two unexpected visitors, Goldberg and McCann, come to the house, apparently to find Stanley. In the middle of the play, an impromptu birthday party is held for Stanley, and a young woman, Lulu, is assaulted when the lights unexpectedly go out during a party game. Goldberg and McCann accuse and interrogate Stanley, though it is unclear what he may have done wrong, and at the end of the play they take the now incoherent and barely conscious Stanley away with them. The action takes place entirely in a down-at-heel domestic setting, with dialogue that appears banal, sometimes witty, but with undercurrents of threat and violence. When the play was previewed in Cambridge before being staged in London, a critic in *Cambridge Review* described it as "nihilistic, for no rich areas of significant human experience seem to exist between the sterile level of reality at the opening (cornflakes, fried bread and the stock question 'Is it nice?') and the subsequent gaping horror and claustrophobia of a neurotic's world" (*The Birthday Party* 1958). While the concept of cringe was yet to be identified, this combination of banality and nihilism was one of the components that would later comprise it.

The London premiere of *The Birthday Party* at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, in 1958 was disastrous, and the play closed after a week because of bad reviews that kept potential audiences away. Milton Shulman of the *Evening Standard* complained that watching the play was like trying "to solve a crossword puzzle where every vertical clue is designed to put you off the horizontal", and he predicted: "It will be best enjoyed by those who believe that obscurity is its own reward." (Shulman 1958). He wondered whether it was a comedy but decided that it was "not funny enough", anticipating the withheld and painful laughter that would later characterise responses to cringe. The formal structures of comic language or action underpinning the play include repetition, incongruity, surprise or reversal of expectation, and conflict with social norms. Repetition is introduced right from the first exchanges between Meg and Petey, as Meg serves her husband his breakfast and awaits Stanley's arrival downstairs. Once he arrives, her flirtatious behaviour towards him is not consonant with her being a married woman in her sixties and he in his thirties. The form of the play somewhat resembles a West End comedy of the 1950s, complete with stock characters of an overbearing Jew and a militant Irishman. As the play progresses, the behaviour of Goldberg and McCann produces further incongruous and surprising situations, such as Stanley's manic beating of a child's toy drum, seemingly expressing some

kind of psychological tension, followed by Stanley's attempted rape of Lulu at his birthday party. Of course, this is also a violation of social norms, as are Goldberg's and McCann's interrogation of Stanley, their terrorisation of him by breaking his glasses, and indeed the whole dramatic action of seeming to torture and abduct a man who seems to be just a failed professional pianist. The rapid repartee between Goldberg and McCann resembles music hall comedy patter, but the language also contains explicit threat, accusations, and demands for answers to nonsensical questions. Physical action that might be comic in another context, like Stanley's banging of the toy drum, McCann obsessively tearing a newspaper into strips, or Goldberg's and McCann's synchronised whistling, become part of an atmosphere in which actions become incongruous, puzzling, and therefore disturbing.

Pinter's work was regarded as obscure and perverse, resembling straight drama in some respects, such as John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, which became the paradigm for gritty, "kitchen sink" drama that featured young, frustrated, and entrapped characters in shabby domestic settings. Many of the playwrights coming to prominence in the late 1950s and early 1960s in London explored versions of social realism (Lacey 1995), associated with the English Stage Company's productions at the Royal Court Theatre, and the experiments by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. In some ways, *The Birthday Party*'s representations of social class echo the realism of urban domestic settings, colloquial speech, exploration of class, sexual repression, and gender inequality in this theatre work. However, commentators (e.g., Esslin 1961) also saw *The Birthday Party* as a British form of the absurd comedy associated with European playwrights, like Samuel Beckett or Eugene Ionesco (Bignell 2020). Shortly before the premiere of Pinter's play, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett 1956) had opened in London in 1955 and Ionesco's *The Lesson* (Ionesco 1958) and *The Bald Prima Donna* (Ionesco 1957) in 1956. The New Left, represented by critics such as Irving Wardle (1958), saw Pinter's drama as revealing political as well as existential entrapment, expressing a crisis in the adequacy of language to convey ideological constraint. The influential critic Harold Hobson (1958) defended *The Birthday Party* in the *Sunday Times* as "theatrically interesting", because it is "witty" and its "plot, which consists, with all kinds of verbal arabesques and echoing explorations of memory and fancy, of the springing of a trap, is first rate." The play looks like British mainstream theatre of the period, with fully realised sets, costumes, and an ensemble of contemporary characters, but its dialogue and action are mysterious, absurd, comic, and violent (Rebellato 1999, p. 147). Pinter's biographer, Michael Billington (2007, p. 86), sums up the contemporary reactions to the play by calling it "gloriously uncategorizable". This oddly hybrid "comedy of menace" is the forerunner of cringe.

Moreover, the use of drama for social commentary shared some of its foci and creative personnel with radio, television, and cinema, and dramas for one medium were adapted into another. Social entrapment, within manual labour, constraining marriage, regional provincialism, or domination by bourgeois authority, was the framework for dramas about rebellious male (and occasionally female) protagonists on the page, stage, and screen (Hill 1986). This broke open the boundaries between high and popular culture as well as the media of production. Pinter's stage work became increasingly well-known, such that the Oxford English Dictionary listed the adjective "Pinteresque" in its 1960 edition. The Pinteresque may not have been "popular" in the sense that it was universally approved, since Pinter himself was a controversial figure and his plays were considered "difficult". However, popular audiences were becoming familiar with Pinter's work in regional, amateur, and student productions of his plays and as published texts. The restricted spatiality that characterises sitcom is a development of theatre Naturalism, and dramas of the enclosed domestic room were adapted from the dominant form of 1950s British theatre to become the main formal convention of television drama's *mise-en-scène* (Williams 1974, p. 56). The tropes of Pinter's work and Galton and Simpson's sitcoms formed part of a shared intermedial phenomenon (Bignell 2021).

It was through radio and television that Pinter's distinctive form of drama, blending Naturalism, European experimentalism, and existential tragi-comedy, became accessible

to a national public. His first televised play was a version of *The Birthday Party* made not by the BBC but by the commercial ITV (Independent Television) channel. The relatively new ITV channel, starting in 1955, had been immediately successful at drawing and holding larger shares of the popular audience than the BBC and rapidly became popular for its entertainment programmes. Nevertheless, like the BBC, ITV was required to offer a full spectrum of TV genres including original and adapted drama. The ITV company Associated-Rediffusion commissioned a television version of *The Birthday Party* (Pinter 1960a), when it was watched by an audience of 11 million (Billington 2007, p. 110). Another ITV programme producer, Granada, made Pinter's play *The Room* (Pinter 1961c), and in the same year, *The Collection* (Pinter 1961a) was made by Associated-Rediffusion and *The Dumb Waiter* (Pinter 1961b) by Granada. Associated-Rediffusion's production of *The Lover* (Pinter 1963b) won the Prix Italia international prize for television drama, and *A Night Out* was made by ABC for ITV (Pinter 1960b). The BBC's first Pinter television play was *Tea Party* (Pinter 1965) in a series of plays by British and European dramatists. Later in the decade, *The Birthday Party* had become sufficiently canonical that it featured in the BBC's *In Rehearsal* (Pinter 1969), which explored how amateur actors might perform well-known modern plays. William Friedkin directed a cinema version of *The Birthday Party* (1968), and it was acquired for television screening, shown in the *Sunday Cinema* series on BBC2, in 1975 (Pinter 1975). There was widespread recognition of Pinter and his distinctive "brand", and his work appeared often on screen. His representation of ordinary people and everyday speech, despite the artifice with which Pinter turned these domestic stories into "menace" and dark comedy, regularly reached mass audiences in the period when *Steptoe and Son* was being devised and screened.

In the early 1960s, British comedy writing was moving from programmes centred on the comic persona of a star performer, like Charlie Drake, Frankie Howerd, or Tony Hancock, to scripted comic dramas to be performed by actors. It was at this transitional moment that the Pinteresque was expressed in television by *Steptoe and Son*. Tom Sloan, Head of Light Entertainment at the BBC in 1961, reacted to news that the comedian Tony Hancock wanted to concentrate on cinema projects and quit television by offering his writers, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, the chance to write a series of 10 half-hour comedy plays (Kilborn 2016). This series, *Comedy Playhouse*, occupied the schedule slots formerly devoted to *Hancock's Half Hour* (Galton and Simpson 2007a). Galton and Simpson's drama 'The Offer' (Galton and Simpson 1962) was broadcast in *Comedy Playhouse*, introducing rag-and-bone men Albert Steptoe (Wilfred Brambell) and his son Harold (Harry H. Corbett). The main premise is that the ageing Albert's dependency on his son frustrates Harold's vain dreams of escaping to make his own way in the world. Pinteresque themes of entrapment and absurd tragi-comedy underpin the series. As a biography of Corbett recounts, Galton said of 'The Offer': "I think we have written a little piece of Pinter here" (Corbett 2012, p. 332). The drama was quickly extended into a successful series, in black and white from 1962–1965 and then in colour from 1970–1974. In a period in which almost all television dramas were shot in a studio, the cringe dramas of entrapment that Pinter explored in stage drama became important to the long-running television sitcom's format.

The comedy is based on the Steptoes' incompatibility. The outlook of the younger Harold (aged in his 30s), who is socially aspirational and forward-looking, contrasts with that of his father Albert, who is at the end of his working life, nostalgic, and set in his ways. In keeping with his ambitions for betterment, Harold affects intellectualism and sophistication, whereas Albert is philistine and content with the working-class values associated with his job and mocks his son's wish to transcend his background. In the 1960s and 1970s when the sitcom was produced, the Labour party, especially in the person of its leader, the Oxford-educated intellectual Harold Wilson, was a progressive force in British politics. Harold is a keen Labour supporter, even standing for the Steptoes' local Parliamentary constituency. Albert, by contrast, favors the traditional Conservative values in which each social class has an assigned place in the hierarchy of society, and the aristocrats and business leaders associated with the Conservatives are regarded as



natural leaders and holders of power. Further sources of conflict between the characters, which are crucial to the comedy of the series, derive from the physical grotesquerie located primarily in Albert. He has unhygienic personal habits, poor table manners, and happily accepts the dirt and deprivation visible in the *mise-en-scène* of the Steptoes' ramshackle, cluttered home. A recurrent insult that Harold directs at Albert, becoming a catchphrase that studio audiences recognized and laughed at, is for him to call Albert "you dirty old man". The obverse of this stigmatization of Albert's physicality is Harold's vanity, expressed in performance by recurrent tropes such as Harold's purchase of fashionable clothes suitable for a younger man than he is, his modish long hair, and his desire to be attractive to women, traits that Albert ridicules as feminizing, superficial, and vain. The underlying dramatic mode that all of this binary characterisation derives from is tragic pathos. The Steptoe father and son depend on each other and cannot separate, despite their mutual hostility. Although they resent each other, even despise each other, neither can live without the other and so nothing can change. They are quite literally on the scrapheap: their business is being scrap merchants and their house and yard are full of unsold stock, piled in heaps surrounding and constraining them.

### 3.2. *The Desperate Hours*

The ways that a heritage of theatre Naturalism, European Absurdism, and popular television sitcom humour combine into cringe depends on specific choices of storyline, script, *mise-en-scène*, and nuances of performance. These can be exemplified by an analysis of an episode of *Steptoe and Son*. The one selected, *The Desperate Hours* (Galton and Simpson 2007b), was chosen for this article because of its similarities of storyline and dramatic technique with *The Birthday Party*, thus demonstrating both the linkage argued for here but also how the sitcom form modifies Pinter's comedy of menace. It is adapted into a specifically televisual format while also alluding to a wider cultural field including cinema (Bignell 2021). In *The Desperate Hours*, a pair of escaped convicts from nearby Wormwood Scrubs prison in West London come to the Steptoes' ramshackle house in the hope of hiding out, echoing Goldberg and McCann's arrival at the boarding house in *The Birthday Party*. The escaped criminals take Harold and Albert hostage to demand food and a fast car, and during the siege, parallels between them and the Steptoes are explored. Each character is trapped with his companion and with the other pair. There is no food, the Steptoes cannot afford to own a car, and like the Steptoes, the convicts can neither escape their situation nor the enclosing space of the room in which the episode is set. Goldberg and McCann depart at the end of Pinter's play, having pressurized the relationships between the household inhabitants left behind, and in *The Desperate Hours*, the prisoners decide to go voluntarily back to their cell, which is another enclosure or trap but a more comfortable one than the Steptoes' shabby home.

The trope of a household invaded by mysterious strangers is not usually funny, but instead menacing. In cinema, the home invasion motif has a long history that goes back to *The Desperate Hours* (1955) from which the *Steptoe and Son* episode borrows its title and in which the invading stranger is played by Humphrey Bogart. It is a film noir, whose claustrophobic, existential bleakness is expressed in the motif of entrapment and in the violence enacted within the familiar space of a suburban home. Bogart played a gangster accompanied by two other sinister men and drew on the star image he had established in earlier gangster thrillers with home invasion motifs, *The Petrified Forest* (1936) and *Huston* (1948). Later, when *Steptoe and Son* was topping British television ratings, the trope of mysterious interlopers was the basis of Roman Polanski's *Cul de Sac* (1965), in which George (Donald Pleasence) and his much younger companion (Françoise Dorléac) are terrorized by two escaping criminals (Bignell 2021). In *Steptoe and Son*, Galton and Simpson rewrite this home invasion trope as comedy but retain the transgression of spatial and bodily boundaries, the testing of familial relationships, and the exploration of social difference that it entails.

Episodes usually begin with a wide shot of the living room of the Steptoes' home, as does *The Desperate Hours* (Figure 1), and this detailed domestic interior, open to a studio audience on one side, very much resembles a stage set like the one specified by Pinter for *The Birthday Party*. Nearest to the camera is a square wooden Victorian dining table, with four wooden chairs, while the back and sides of the set are crammed with items that we assume the scrap dealers have collected on their rounds over the years. Although the lighting is dim, the disorderly surroundings can be seen to include a human skeleton like those used by trainee doctors, a Victorian wind-up phonograph with a large trumpet loudspeaker, and stacked Victorian furniture in dark mahogany that reaches above head height. To the left, there is a large Victorian roll-top desk, strewn with items including a goldfish in its bowl and various papers. On the right-hand side of the set is a large wooden sideboard, with shelves on which are mounted a collection of bottles of liquor upturned into the dispensers used to measure out drinks in a bar. The setting shows the accumulation of objects over decades, even generations, and the palimpsestic layering of newer over older items without any sense of design or décor. The two men are surrounded by this encroaching debris, despite the generous size of the space, and it physically expresses their inability to change their circumstances or their relationship with each other.



**Figure 1.** The Steptoes in their shabby home, with accumulated bric-a-brac.

In this episode, the opening wide shot shows Albert and Harold seated at the table playing a game of cribbage. Positioned on a chair in front of them is a small electric heater. Harold is wearing an overcoat and thick coachman's gauntlets, while Albert has a blanket around his shoulders and is wearing frayed woollen fingerless gloves. The opening signature tune comes to a close and is replaced by the sound of a whistling wind, signifying the winter evening weather outside. Harold complains of the cold, demanding his ten-minute turn to have the electric fire to himself. As they complete the game of cribbage, their conversation tells us that they have no money left after three weeks of poor trade. They have pawned their television set and spent their savings, leaving unpaid bills. Harold lugubriously asks, "Do you know what I've had to eat today? Half a carrot. And I had to fight to get that out of the horse's mouth." The live studio audience laugh twice, after the mention of the carrot and then of the horse. Aside from its demonstration of abjection, deprivation, and discomfort, this joke is the first example of the grotesque in the episode. The carrot also recalls Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which Estragon offers to his fellow tramp Vladimir the remains of one found in the pockets of his ragged clothes.



That Harold should have to compete with the horse that pulls their rag and bone cart, in order to find a single raw vegetable to satisfy his hunger, conjures an image of Harold as pitiable and pathetic. The physicality of the struggle for the carrot and the suggestions of blind appetite and ruthlessness born from starvation position Harold as a figure with whom we might sympathise but also who we would repudiate as inhuman and degraded. It is a moment that would now be called “cringe”.

For Sigmund Freud ([1905] 1960), the comic involves two positions. The first is the one who observes, such as a member of the audience. The second is the one who appears comic, such that the first person recognises their speech or behaviour and sets it at a low value as being something superseded or childish. The saving of the psychic expenditure that would have been consequent on such childish action is released as laughter. Therefore, the comic must be presented for observation, so that the viewer can occupy the position of a person who finds something or someone comic. As Stephen Wagg (1998) observes, from the early 1960s, these relationships of power and superiority in television comedy were strongly inflected with social class. They became a key part of *Steptoe and Son*'s comedy of embarrassment (Dickason 2016, p. 49), aimed at making the normative middle-class viewer cringe at rudeness, crudity, and abjection. This kind of comedy is particularly appropriate to visual media, in that comic images can be discovered, revealed, or framed for the viewer.

Stephen Neale (1981, p. 30) summarises the sitcom genre in terms of its combination of jokes and comic action within the shaping framework of narrative: “just as comedy is irreducible to the comic (and vice versa), so equally it is irreducible to the joke. If anything, comedy is a string, a sequence, a *narration* of jokes and joke-like structures (i.e., gags, comic segments) [ . . . ] The narration transforms their status and meaning by acting as the agent of their articulation and by providing the context of signification in relation to which they are read.” Television sitcom adds to the structural characteristics of comedy in general by using conventions of framing and shot-reverse shot that show characters reacting to each other's comic actions, setting them within a spatial context and a context of narrative storytelling against which comic moments become both intelligible and foregrounded. Sitcom form includes “meta-linguistic markers” (Palmer 1987, p. 23) that situate the audience such that the characters and their actions are set at a distance and made available within the framing discourse of the genre. Neale and Krutnik (1990, p. 17) offer a characteristic formulation when they note that: “Sitcom episodes have a ‘classical’ narrative structuring in that the narrative process is inaugurated by some disruption of or threat to a stable situation, necessitating the movement towards the reassertion of stability. [ . . . ] The end of the episode represents a return to the initial stability.” While *The Desperate Hours* has by now established the comedy of the relationship between Harold and Albert, the narrative of the specific episode introduces a new situation that will pressurize it further and produce further opportunities for cringe humour.

Harold moves across the set, failing to find any alcohol in the bottles ranged above the sideboard. He embarks on a parody of a colonial scene in a rubber plantation in the steaming heat of the tropical jungle, as aristocratic British planters take cocktails in their club at the end of the day. His vocal and physical performance of the British colonial ascendancy is not only comic in itself but reflects on the antithesis between civilization and animality, and between restraint and desire. The coldness of the Steptoes' house versus the jungle heat performed in Harold's satire on rubber planters prompts him to reflect on his time serving in the British Army in Malaysia. He recalls that he could have married the daughter of a Chinese shipping owner but instead longed for home, the cold, dirty, unrewarding drudgery that he is now experiencing. Suddenly, the lights in the house go out, and Harold searches for a candle and lights one, while Albert looks for foreign coins to put into their electricity meter to renew the power supply. Harold can only offer three and a half pence from his pocket, less than the shilling (5 pence) that they need. Harold moves to the other side of the set and switches on a battery-powered radio. An announcer warns of the escape from Wormwood Scrubs prison of John Spooner, aged 38, and Frank Ferris, aged 64, who are armed robbers. Just then, someone knocks at the door. The set-up

for the comedy situation is in place, and it is based, as is *The Birthday Party*, on establishing a domestic menage and then disrupting it.

While Harold recharges the meter with a German Pfennig coin, Albert comes back from opening the door, his neck gripped by a younger man in prison uniform (Leonard Rossiter), evidently Johnny (Figure 2). Johnny menaces Albert with a piece of lead piping, but his calls for food, a car, the use of a telephone, and some money fall flat because the Steptoes have none of these things. Harold obeys Johnny's order to empty his pockets, and the camera shows in closeup the three and a half pence that he places on the table. Quickly, the Steptoes are united by their victimisation by the intruders, but the power dynamic shifts when the convicts' plan to escape is foiled by the Steptoes' poverty. The audience is invited to sympathise with the Steptoes because of their inability to escape their situation but also to find their aggression towards each other and their selfishness embarrassing and repellent. The dynamic in the sitcom recalls the way Pinter's play invited audiences to find Goldberg's charming manipulateness witty initially, but then to experience its repugnant development into the taunting of Stanley. Shifts in viewers' relationship with the characters in *The Desperate Hours* continue as the episode shows how the convicts are trapped and increasingly hopeless, like the Steptoes, placing them into a sympathetic position despite their anti-social and violent pasts.



**Figure 2.** Johnny, with Frank (right), threatens the Steptoes.

Johnny explains to Harold and Albert how his cellmate and companion Frank (J. G. Devlin) got caught on the barbed wire of the prison walls during their escape. In the robbery for which they were originally convicted, Frank could not get away because he had stuffed his pockets with bars of bullion from a bank vault. Frank always holds Johnny back, Johnny complains. Harold enthusiastically makes the parallel with his father Albert: "It's just like him out there. He's held me back all my life, he has." Albert comes back into the room carrying the food demanded by the convicts, but it is only cold porridge from breakfast, some dry bread, and a piece of mouldy cheese, recalling the way distasteful food appears right from the beginning of *The Birthday Party* in the out-of-date milk on Petey's cornflakes. Albert suggests, helpfully, "you can scrape the green bits off" to make the cheese edible, but Johnny is shocked. "We can't eat this, it's disgusting. There'd be a riot if they served that in prison." While Johnny turns away in resignation and disgust, Frank tucks into the cold porridge and rebukes him: "Trouble with you is, you've got it too easy. I was brought up during the Depression. You ate what you could get." Albert

and Frank join in bemoaning the younger generation's lack of appreciation for their elders (Figure 3). The four characters group around the table, in positions that pair them off with each other visually. The elders Albert and Frank find mutual solidarity against Harold and Johnny, who also share a resentment of the older companions with whom they are stuck.



**Figure 3.** Frank enjoys Albert's lumpy porridge.

Harold begs a cigarette, and then some matches, from Johnny while Frank slobbers his porridge. Albert asks: "It's not too lumpy for you?" to which Frank replies "No, no, I like lumps." In a demonstration of fellow feeling, Albert puts his blanket around Frank's shoulders. Frank shovels spoonfuls of cold porridge into his mouth with relish and white gobs of it become smeared around his lips and fall back into the bowl. Johnny criticises Frank's table-manners, and Harold responds: "He's got manners like Anna Neagle compared with him", indicating his father. When Johnny explains he has been locked up with Frank for five years, Harold counters, "You're lucky, I've done 39"; he has been trapped with his father for his whole life. This begins a passage of dialogue based on reminiscence, suggesting a mood of nostalgia but at the same time revealing how the past has determined and constrained the actions of the present. Pinter uses a similar motif in *The Birthday Party* to offer apparent insights into Goldberg's psychology and Stanley's background. However, Goldberg's reminiscences are not only puzzling but also a rhetorical strategy of manipulation, and Stanley's earlier career as a pianist seems very distant from the gangland thuggery associated with Goldberg and McCann, which in some way leads them to look for Stanley. Reminiscence in *The Desperate Hours* explains how the convicts became stuck with each other. Frank explains how he discovered Johnny, who was a bank clerk, and taught him how to be a robber. Ever since, Johnny has been in and out of prison, and Johnny complains that Frank has ruined his chances of building a career as a bank manager and becoming respectable. Similarly, Harold claims that he wanted to be a doctor but Albert would not let him, to which Johnny responds "That's tragic, that is. He could have been eminent by now. He could have had a string of abortion clinics." Different kinds of physical, bodily references here, in the physical action and the dialogue, give the comedy a troubling viscosity that can feel potentially invasive, bringing unpleasant or painful physicality too close. Frank's disgusting eating habits and the reference to abortion, then only recently legalised in the UK, are also infused with a commentary on social class, since good manners and being a doctor are distinctly bourgeois, while robbery and performing illegal abortions for money belong to a twilight world outside of respectable norms.



A police siren sounds. Johnny tries to leave the house, but Frank is too feeble to run and does not want to be left behind. As the drama comes towards its close, the four characters stand lined up, facing the camera as they each decide what to do. Johnny prevails with the view that since they will soon be caught anyhow, all he and Frank can do is go back to prison. Albert volunteers to Frank: "I'll bring you some porridge on visiting day", to which Frank warmly replies: "And don't forget to keep the lumps in". The lights go down as the Pfennig coin runs out, but Johnny comes to their aid and hands over a shilling for the meter. The convicts have got nothing from their captives and instead have lent support to the pair before quietly leaving. The lights come back on, and Harold and Albert realise they are again alone together in the silent house. Albert expresses his pleasure that the two convicts stayed together, paralleling their mutual dependency with that of himself and his son. In the episode's final line, Harold notes "I'd better go and lock the cage up", as he goes to secure the front door for the night and seal the Steptoes in together. There is a cut to a brief shot of the set representing the exterior of the house, which is a cobbled yard filled with broken furniture, old tyres, and broken domestic appliances. Finally, the camera shows the inside of the cell at Wormwood Scrubs as the door opens and Johnny and Frank enter, supervised by a prison guard. Each pair is back inside their cage, the initiating disruption removed, recalling the departure of Goldberg, McCann, and Stanley in *The Birthday Party* and giving the sense in both Pinter's play and in *The Desperate Hours* that despite the traumatic events preceding it, no consequences will ensue for those left behind.

The programme makes use of multiple conventions of television comedy to secure an identification with its characters and thus to secure the grounds of comic pleasure for a viewer. An emphasis on facial expression and verbal peculiarities, and the repetitive patterning of a restricted set of discursive forms in the characters' speech, underline both character identity and the particularity of this sitcom's comic form. The narrative creates an order and pattern for the relations between the characters and the viewer. This relationship depends on a comparison that favours the ego of the viewer who observes each comic moment, and comic pleasure derives from a constructed position of superiority and self-sufficiency for the viewer. However, this superiority is activated by the viewer's perception of, and alignment with, another person who is homologous to but repudiated by them (Neale 1981, p. 35). The repudiated other, playing the role of a less respectable, polite, kind, or physically able comparator of the viewer, is set at a distance but is always there, bordering, undercutting, and even haunting the viewer's sense of security, and it is this tension that is expressed in the feeling of cringe.

### 3.3. Cringe, Comedy, and Politics

There are reasons to doubt the significance of cringe as a form of social critique, however. In 1970, in a review of a new series of *Steptoe and Son*, television critic and theorist Raymond Williams (1989, p. 125) wrote: "This is the pattern of men trapped in rooms, working out the general experience of being cheated and frustrated, on the most immediately available target: the others inside the cage." He identifies this entrapment in nineteenth-century drama by Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Anton Chekhov, arguing that it becomes comic in the work of Eugene Ionesco, John Osborne, and Harold Pinter, where entrapment is "at once absurd and sinister" (Williams 1989, p. 125). Williams's complaint about this form is that the enclosed world, peopled by a frustrated dreamer who is paired with a conservative and deferential yet vicious figure, allows no possibility of genuine engagement with the lived social world outside the room and therefore no prospect of material change for the characters. The repetition inherent in the sitcom format, and the anachronistic setting of *Steptoe and Son* in the run-down London docklands, meant that while Harold might represent (comparative) youth and aspiration, his dreams could be ridiculed. The audience's laughter, Williams concludes, is evidence of submission to circumstance, a "rueful laugh in the trap" (Williams 1989, p. 127). His argument is that the progressive ways in which theatre could express and then critique stultifying entrapment

had been co-opted for popular cultural forms that implicitly justify political stasis and existential resignation.

Cringe became increasingly important to British stage and screen culture, and new work often deployed personnel who had associations with either Pinter, *Steptoe and Son*, or both. To give a couple of brief examples, in 1972, the same year that Rossiter appeared in *The Desperate Hours*, he played the tramp Davies in a revival of Pinter's stage play *The Caretaker* (Pinter 1960c) a role he had first played in 1961. The play's setting and theme of entrapment is very similar to that of *Steptoe and Son*. It takes place in Aston's derelict household into which Davies brings his pretensions to a better life that he would be able to access, he says, if he can get to Sidcup to retrieve his papers. Although Davies is expelled from the house at the end of the play, the audience never sees him leave the room. The stage action finishes while he remains trapped with his dreams of leaving just as the Steptoes and the two convicts do in *The Desperate Hours*. In another example of this web of connections, Brambell played the avaricious and prejudiced landlord Rooksby in Eric Chappell's comedy play *The Banana Box* (Chappell 1974) premiered at Hampstead Theatre Club in London in November 1970. Set in a large decaying house that Rooksby lets out to a pair of students and the spinster Miss Jones, the play was adapted to become the hit ITV television sitcom *Rising Damp* (Chappell 2008; Hewett n.d.). Brambell's role was taken by Rossiter and renamed Rigsby for the television version. Similar cringe-worthy moments occur in *Rising Damp* as in *Steptoe and Son*, though Rigsby's character is less sympathetic and the mood less tragic. Cringe was also a resource for transatlantic television trading, thanks to the efforts of the writers' and actors' agent Beryl Vertue (Knox 2019). The format and scripts for *Steptoe and Son* were sold to the NBC network in the USA and became the basis for the hit sitcom *Sanford and Son* (Ruben et al. 2008) under the progressive producer Norman Lear. The series, like *Steptoe and Son*, was seen as both funny and a profound analysis of social conventions, especially inter-generational tensions and radical versus progressive politics.

However, as the remarks by Williams (1989) quoted above point out, the risk of this form is that the relationship between the viewer and the comic characters in cringe can lead in two directions. The abduction of the incoherently burbling Stanley in *The Birthday Party* inspires both empathy and repugnance, for example, and in *The Desperate Hours*, the audience is invited to fear for the plight of the familiar Steptoe characters and also to find them selfish and pathetic, just as the criminal interlopers are. The familiarity with the format and characters that sitcom audiences are encouraged to gain, as a result of the form's inherent repetition, is double-edged. From the perspective of the historiography of cringe, this article has argued that Pinter's pioneering theatre drama impacted the ways that cringe developed in popular culture. However, the very familiarity and repetition of the sitcom form mean that viewers' enlistment alongside marginal, disempowered, and frustrated characters is hedged around by the norms of respectability and aspiration that they fail to meet. As Dickason (2016) shows with reference to a wide range of British sitcoms, flashes of resistance, rebellion, and critique are framed within the consensual and hegemonic cultural forms that Williams (1974) identified in television.

The commissioning of original and adapted cringe sitcoms perpetuated the form, with the added importance of repetition. Broadcasting has always used repeats and remakes to fill schedules, which not only has contributed to the building of a cringe canon but also enables the viewing of cringe histories alongside new productions. *The Birthday Party* has been very often repeated on television, perhaps most significantly in 1987 with Pinter himself in the role of Goldberg (Pinter 1987). This television version was repeated on BBC2 in 1989, again on BBC4 in 2002, and again on BBC4 in a season of Pinter-related memorial programmes in 2009. *Steptoe and Son* is a classic of British television's Golden Age (Kilborn 2016), and the programme has been very often repeated on television, especially the colour episodes of the 1970s, including *The Desperate Hours*. Such repetitions are an important continuing presence of cringe history in British popular culture, connecting with, and probably influential on, contemporary cringe forms. The recontextualization of cringe



histories over and again offers a new twist on Williams's criticism of cringe comedy for its existential and political stasis. The repetition of the theme of entrapment drives the comedy, and the repetition inherent in episodic sitcom means neither the characters nor their situation can change. However, to set *Steptoe and Son* against newer cringe sitcoms like *The Office* or *Motherland* (Horgan et al. 2019) offers opportunities to read each one in relation to the others, both historicizing cringe and perpetuating its present significance.

#### 4. Materials and Methods

The analysis of primary materials undertaken here was conducted by viewing commercially available DVD copies of television programmes and consulting published scripts. Contextual and historical information was derived from the extensive critical literature published on histories of British theatre, television, and cinema, supported by information from publicly available online databases and websites, especially those produced or hosted by the BBC, British Film Institute, and Learning on Screen. The methodology of combining close textual analysis of audio-visual materials with historical and contextual information is an established approach in Television Studies and especially in television historiography. Such methods are discussed and evaluated in a large body of metacritical scholarship (e.g., Hilmes 2003; Jacobs and Peacock 2013; Wheatley 2007).

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